

A STATEWIDE STUDY OF “BRICK AND MORTAR” PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOLS IN IDAHO

Changhua Wang, Ed.D.

March 2009



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IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOLS AT A GLANCE

- Since the passage of the Idaho Charter School Law in 1998, a total of 34 charter schools have opened and three of them have closed voluntarily. There are now five virtual charter schools and 26 “brick and mortar” charter schools in operation.
- Currently, there are about 10,768 charter school students, representing four percent of the total K–12 student population in Idaho. About 36 percent of charter school students are enrolled in four virtual charter schools and one distance education school. About 44 percent of charter school students are in Treasure Valley, the most heavily populated area in the state.
- About 70 percent of charter school students were enrolled in non-charter public schools before attending charter schools.
- The most frequently used words in charter school vision statements include “moral character,” “character education,” “kindness,” “character development,” “kinder community,” “dignity,” and “value.”
- Over 80 percent of 26 “brick and mortar” charter schools included in this study have kindergarten as part of the grade levels they serve. About 85 percent of these schools served elementary or middle school students. Close to the half of these schools served high school students.
- The top three factors affecting parents’ choice for charter schools are: “philosophy of the school,” “small school or class size,” and “safe school environment.”
- About 37 percent of charter school parents will enroll their children back in non-charter public schools (particularly non-charter public high schools) some time in the future.
- Data from a five-year Idaho state assessment show that charter school students performed better academically when compared with other students in non-charter public schools.
- Ninety-seven percent of student, parent, and staff survey respondents are happy with their charter schools.

INTRODUCTION

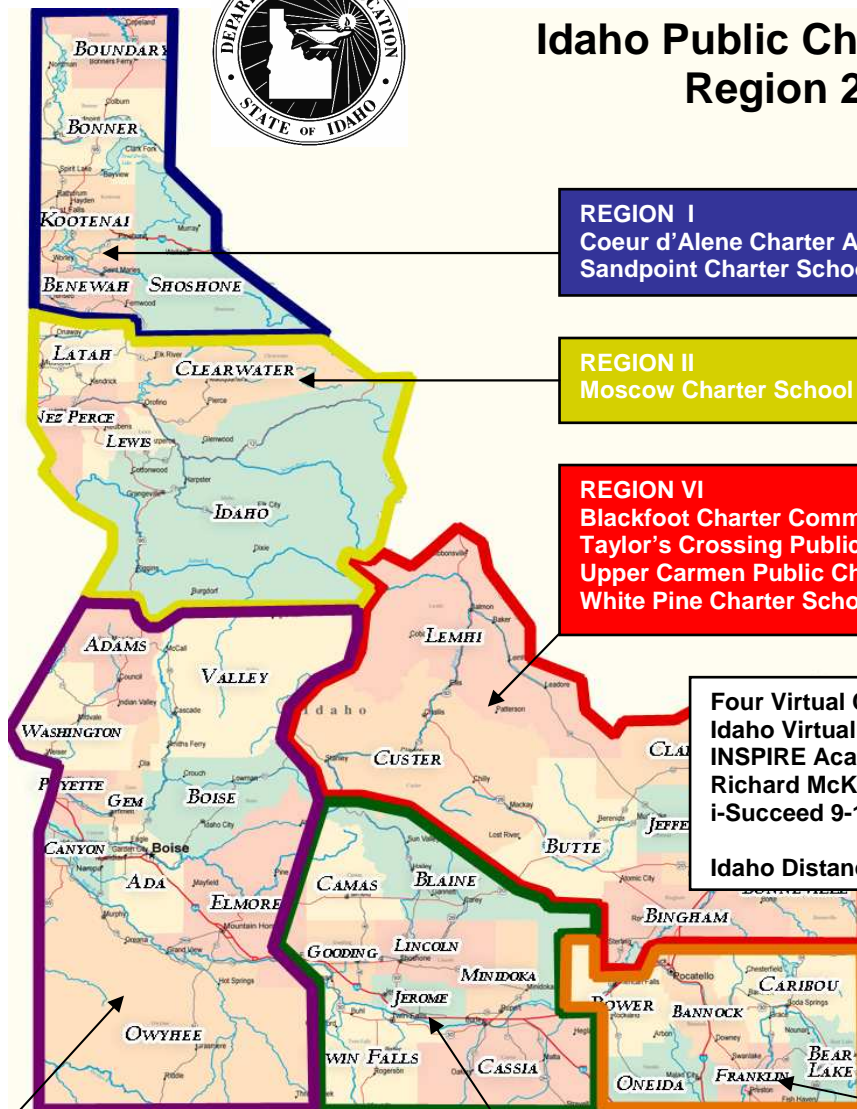
The year 2008 marked the 10th anniversary of the passage of the Charter School Law in Idaho. The intent of the law is to provide opportunities for teachers, parents, students, and community members to establish and maintain public charter schools that operate independently from the existing school structure but within the existing public school system as a method to accomplish any of the following:

1. Improve student learning.
2. Increase learning opportunities for all students, with special emphasis on expanded learning experiences for students.
3. Include the use of different and innovative teaching methods.
4. Utilize virtual distance learning and online learning.
5. Create new professional opportunities for teachers, including the opportunity to be responsible for the learning program at the school site.
6. Provide parents and students with expanded choices in the types of educational opportunities that are available within the public school system.
7. Hold charter schools accountable for meeting measurable student educational standards.

Nationally, about 4,600 charter schools now serve more than 1.3 million students in 40 states and the District of Columbia (*Education Week*, Vol. 28, No. 22, February 25, 2009). In the State of Idaho, a total of 31 charter schools serve about 10,768 students, representing approximately 4 percent of the total K–12 school student population. Approximately 36 percent (3,832 students) of the charter school students are enrolled in four virtual charter schools and one distance education school. In 2007–08, the Idaho Charter School Network reported that 6,981 students were on waiting lists for various charter schools in the state. About 44 percent of current charter school students are enrolled in 16 charter schools located in or near Boise, the largest city in Idaho. The map on the next page shows the locations of all Idaho public charter schools by region.



Idaho Public Charter Schools by Region 2008-2009



REGION I

Coeur d'Alene Charter Academy – Coeur d'Alene 6-12
Sandpoint Charter School – Sandpoint 6-8

REGION II

Moscow Charter School – Moscow K-6

REGION VI

Blackfoot Charter Comm. Learning Center – Blackfoot K-6
Taylor's Crossing Public Charter School – Idaho Falls K-9
Upper Carmen Public Charter School – Carmen K-3
White Pine Charter School – Idaho Falls K-8

Four Virtual Charter Schools:

Idaho Virtual Academy K-12
INSPIRE Academics, Inc. K-11
Richard McKenna Charter High School 9-12
i-Succeed 9-12

Idaho Distance Education Academy K-12*

REGION III

Anser Charter School – Boise K-8
Compass Public Charter School – Meridian K-9
Falcon Ridge Public Charter School – Kuna K-10
Garden City Community School – Boise K-8
Hidden Springs Charter School – Boise K-8
Idaho Arts Charter School – Nampa K-12
Liberty Charter School – Nampa K-12
Meridian Charter High School – Meridian 9-12
Meridian Medical Arts Charter H.S. – Meridian 9-12
North Star Charter School – Meridian K-9
Richard McKenna Charter H. S. – Mountain Home 9-12
Rolling Hills Public Charter School – Boise K-8
Thomas Jefferson Charter School – Caldwell K-9
Victory Charter School. – Nampa K-9
Vision Public Charter School – Caldwell K-7

REGION V

Academy at Roosevelt Center – Pocatello K-8
Pocatello Comm. Charter School – Pocatello K-8

REGION IV

ARTEC Charter School – Twin Falls 9-12
Xavier Charter School – Twin Falls K-8
North Valley Academy – Gooding K-9

* IDEA is identified as a distance education school, not a virtual school.

SCOPE OF THIS STUDY

The current study is commissioned by the Idaho Department of Education and funded through a Charter School Support Program Grant* by the U.S. Department of Education. This study seeks to address the following key questions:

- What are the key reasons students choose to attend or leave charter schools?
- What are the experiences of students, parents, and teachers with charter schools?
- What is innovative about charter schools' structures and programs in meeting students' needs?
- How did students in charter schools perform academically in comparison with those in non-charter public schools over the past five years, as indicated by Idaho statewide assessments?
- What are the barriers and facilitators of charter school operations with regard to policies and regulations at the state, district, and school levels?

Early in the design stage of this study, at the beginning of 2008, advisory committee members (members are listed in the "Acknowledgements") and Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) researchers agreed that it is not appropriate to mix virtual charter schools and "brick and mortar" (that is, schools housed in physical buildings) charter schools to address the above questions because of the significant differences between these two kinds of schools in their structures and instructional approaches. As a result, the study includes only the 26 "brick and mortar" charter schools in operation in 2008. All the study findings presented in this report speak only to these schools.

Data for this study were collected from charter school principals, students, their parents, and teachers. In addition to existing data such as student demographics and their scores on the Idaho statewide assessment, most data for this study were collected via surveys of students, parents, teachers, and charter school principals.

* Title V, Part B, Subpart 1 of the Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965, as amended by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

Student Survey. An online survey was developed for sixth- through 12th-graders enrolled in Idaho charter schools. (The survey was written at a sixth- to seventh-grade reading level, so it is appropriate to exclude fifth-grade and younger students from this survey). In addition to assessing reasons for entering and leaving charter schools, the survey also explored students’ views of learning conditions and their levels of engagement in their charter schools.

Parent Survey. A scannable parent survey was developed for parents whose children are currently enrolled in charter schools. Questions included in the parent survey are compatible with those in the student survey.

Staff Survey. An online survey was developed for charter school staff members with questions compatible with those on the student and parent surveys. In addition, staff members were asked about their satisfaction with working in charter schools as compared to their previous working experience, their opinions about curricula used in their charter schools, and their assessment of staff development needs.

Charter School Principal Survey. An electronic version of the survey was developed for the principals of the charter schools. The survey was designed (1) to assess the quality of their schools, including the qualifications of staff members, curricula used, and innovative ways of meeting students’ needs; (2) to obtain their feedback on various policies/regulations at the district and state level, and their views of various policies in their schools; and (3) to identify staff development needs and support they need from their sponsoring school districts and state.

Student Academic Performance Data and No Child Left Behind Status. Charter school students’ scores on Idaho statewide assessment tests were compared with non-charter public school students’ scores in the state by grade level, gender, ethnicity, Title 1 status, and special education status. The comparison was conducted year by year horizontally and longitudinally over a five-year period (2004 to 2008).

SURVEY FINDINGS

Survey Respondents

Between October and December 2008, the Northwest Lab surveyed the principals of the 26 “brick and mortar” charter schools in Idaho, as well as students of sixth- through 12th-graders, staff members, and parents of these charter schools. All 26 principals, 2,118 students, 376 staff members, and 1,883 parents responded to the survey.

Student Respondents

About 70 percent of the student respondents were enrolled in non-charter public schools before attending charter schools. About seven percent came from home schools and the same percent from private schools. Only three student respondents indicated they were dropouts. About 70 percent were sixth- through eighth-graders and the rest were high school students (ninth- through 12th-graders). There was almost equal gender distribution among student respondents: 70 percent described themselves as white and 15 percent were multiethnic or multiracial. Minority students in this group consisted of Hispanic/Latino (6.2 percent), Native Americans (3.8 percent), Asian (2.1 percent), Black or African American (1.7 percent), and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander (1.2 percent). As shown on the following table, over 90 percent of student respondents were college bound.

Table 1
Highest Level of Education Aspired by Percentage of
Student Respondents

Level of Education	%
4-year college degree or higher	71.8
Some college but less than a 4-year college degree	10.0
2-year college degree	9.1
1-year trade school	1.2
High school diploma	4.7
GED	1.1
Less than high school	2.0
Total	100.0

Staff Respondents

Almost half of all employees in these schools, or 376 staff members, responded to the survey. Over 76 percent of the staff respondents were classroom teachers in their charter schools (see Table 2).

Table 2
Percent of Charter School Staff Who Checked Their
Major Roles in Their Schools

Major Responsibility	N	%
Teacher	286	76.1
Instructor (under supervision of certified staff)	9	2.4
Teaching assistant	43	11.4
Specialist	43	11.4
Student teacher	1	.3
Counselor	9	2.4
Other	44	11.7

Out of 286 staff members identified as classroom teachers, 81 percent were teaching before they were employed in their current charter schools. About 67 percent were teaching at non-charter public schools, 19 percent in private schools, and the rest in home schools, other charter schools, alternative schools, and colleges and universities. On average, these classroom teachers had been teaching or working in their current charter schools for three to four years, but their overall average (including teaching in their current charter schools and any other schools) was around 12 to 13 years. Over 55 percent of these classroom teachers had more than 10 years of teaching experience. About 92 percent of these classroom teachers are currently certified to teach in Idaho. Table 3 summarizes the percent of the classroom teacher respondents to their teaching certification status.

About 81 percent of the staff respondents (including classroom teachers and other staff members) are female and 94 percent are white. Three hundred and thirty-seven staff respondents indicated the highest level of education they had attained. All of them have college degrees: 30.6 percent with bachelor's degree, 32.0 percent with some graduate work, 35.0 percent with master's degree, and 2.4 percent with doctorate degree.

Table 3
Certification Status of Charter School Classroom Teacher Respondents

Teaching Certification Status	%
I am currently certified to teach in Idaho	81.1
I am currently certified to teach in Idaho and in another state	11.2
I am currently certified to teach in another state	3.1
I am working to obtain teacher certification in Idaho	4.2
Other	.3
Total	100.0

Parent Respondents

Eighty-five percent of parent respondents are mothers or female guardians. About 83 percent of the parent respondents are college educated. Parents who have more than one child enrolled in the same charter school were asked to choose one child and complete the survey on his/her behalf. About 47 percent had more than one child enrolled in the same charter school, so parent respondents in this study represented at least 2,653 K–12 students enrolled in charter schools. When asked how many children between the ages of five and 18 they have, 41.5 percent reported having three or more, 37.9 percent having two children, and 20.6 percent having one child. For the 1,377 parents who have more than one child, 47 percent reported they had other children attending non-charter public schools.

Over 97 percent of these parents were expecting their children to obtain a higher education beyond high school: 4-year college degree or higher, 87.6 percent; some college but less than college degree, 5.1 percent; 2-year college degree, 3.2 percent; and 1-year trade school, 1.4 percent. About 88 percent of the parents described themselves as white and about 6 percent as multiethnic/multiracial. The rest of parent respondents are minorities: Native American, .3 percent; Asian, .5 percent; Black/African American, .3 percent; Hispanic/Latino, 4.3 percent; and Native Hawaii or other Pacific Islander, .4 percent.

Participating Schools

School Mission

All 26 school principals provided information about their school mission; they also had Web sites presenting their mission- and school-related information. Approximately one third of charter schools reflected a dominant theme of inculcating values in students. The most frequently used words reflecting the concept of values include: “moral character,” “character education,” “kindness,” “character development,” “kinder community,” “dignity, and “value.” Often these descriptors came from schools implementing the “Harbor School Method,” which places a major emphasis on character development as a mechanism for creating safe learning environments. The assumption is that a safe learning environment develops a disposition to learn and helps accelerate learning:

The Vision of [our school] is rooted in the belief that when there is low threat and content is highly challenging, accelerated learning takes place. [Our school] will improve student learning by creating a low-threat environment and safe harbor. [Our school] will create this low-threat environment and safe harbor with the innovative harbor institute and character education curriculum that focuses on kindness and taps into each child’s need to know boundaries while protecting every child’s dignity. —Anonymous principal

However, all the missions reflected a need to create schools distinctive from the mainstream as a strategy for creating school climates that repositioned students at the center of learning, emphasizing character development, civic responsibility, and academic acceleration.

These charter school missions appear to reflect an array of choices for students and families ranging from an emphasis on direct instruction to inquiry and project-based learning. They reflect an effort to get back to core principles of education and learning, namely, to ensure that all children achieve to their potential.

Charter School Students

Idaho charter schools are typically small in terms of student enrollment. Out of 26 schools included in this study, only six enrolled more than 400 students. In 2008–09, these 26 participating schools enrolled a total of 7,495

students. About 21 percent of the total student population in these schools participated in a free or reduced-price lunch program (seven schools did not have data available), around 6 to 7 percent were special education students. Thirty-three students were reported as English Language Learners (ELL). About 91 percent are white. Hispanic/Latino students are largest minority group (363 or 5.1 percent) in these charter schools with the other minority groups composed of Asian/Pacific Islanders (121 or 1.7 percent), black/African American (78 or 1.1 percent), and Native American (27 or 0.4 percent). About 36 students or 0.5 percent were reported as multiethnic or multi-racial. The following table lists the schools in this study alphabetically, the total number of students enrolled in 2008–09, and grade levels offered.

Table 4
“Brick and Mortar” Charter Schools Included in This Study

School	Grade	N	%
1. Academy at Roosevelt Center (ARC)	K–8	274	4
2. Anser Charter School	K–8	189	3
3. ARTEC Charter School	9–12	200	3
4. Blackfoot Charter Community Learning Center	K–6	119	2
5. Coeur d’Alene Charter Academy	6–12	548	7
6. Compass Public Charter School	K–10	427	6
7. Falcon Ridge Public Charter School	K–8	265	4
8. Garden City Community School	K–8	151	2
9. Hidden Springs Charter School	K–6	461	6
10. Idaho Arts Charter School	K–12	578	8
11. Liberty Charter School	K–12	406	5
12. Meridian Technical Charter High School	9–12	199	3
13. Meridian Medical Arts Charter High School	9–12	189	3
14. Moscow Charter School (K–6) 143 students	K–6	143	2
15. North Star Charter School	K–10	497	7
16. North Valley Academy	K–8	149	2
17. Pocatello Community Charter School	K–8	315	4
18. Rolling Hills Public Charter School	K–8	253	3
19. Sandpoint Charter School	6–8	149	2
20. Taylor’s Crossing Public Charter School	K–10	334	4
21. Thomas Jefferson Charter School	K–11	364	5
22. Upper Carmen Public Charter School	K–5	47	1
23. Victory Charter School	K–11	367	5
24. Vision Charter School	K–8	225	3
25. White Pine Charter School	K–8	355	5
26. Xavier Charter School	K–9	291	4
Total		7,495	100

Grade Level Configuration

As shown in the following figure, over 80 percent of these 26 schools included kindergarten as part of the grade levels they serve. About 85 percent of these schools served elementary or middle school students. Close to the half of them served high school students. At the time of the survey, only two schools served students from K–12. Schools that have already started to serve ninth-graders are more likely in the future to extend their grade levels all the way to 12th grade. In 2008–09, eight additional charter schools were approved to expand to serve high school students.

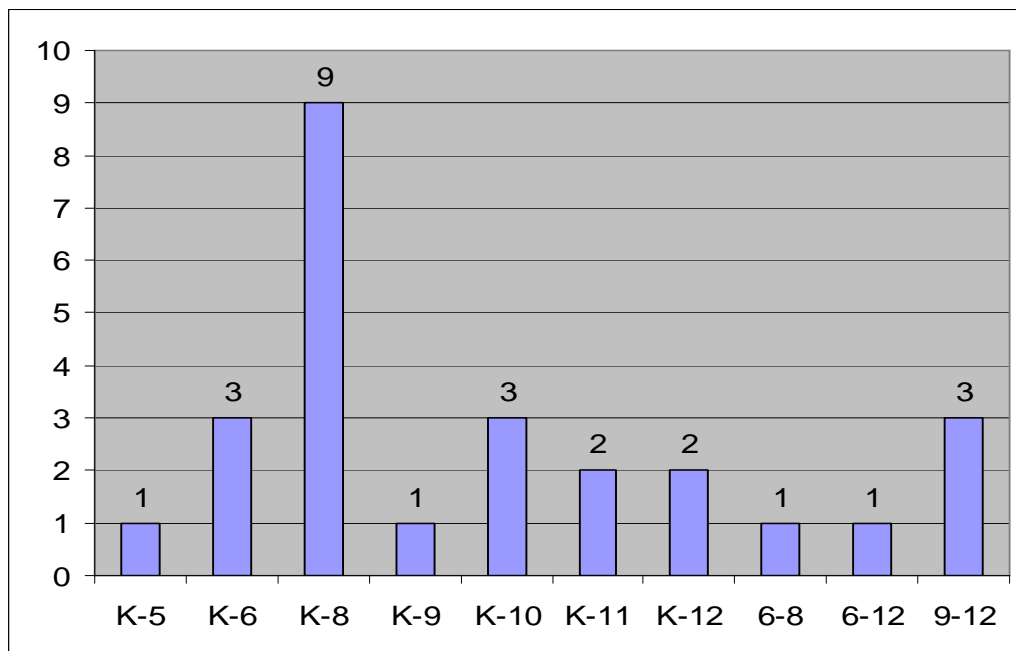


Figure 1. School Grade Level Configuration of Charter Schools

Chartering and Operation

It typically took two to five years for a charter petition to be approved in Idaho. It usually took about one year for most participating schools in this study to move from charter approval to school opening; the time needed for going through this process ranged from four to 27 months. The following figure summarizes the number of “brick and mortar” charter schools opened since 1999.

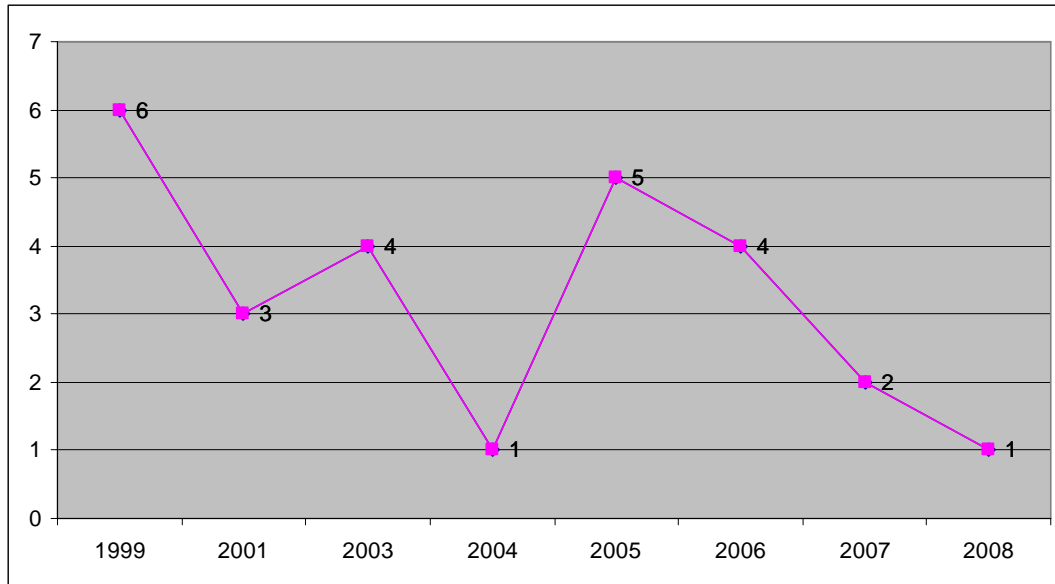


Figure 2. Number of “Brick and Mortar” Charter Schools Opened Each Year Since 1999

All 26 schools are newly created charter schools. Sixty-five percent (17 schools) are housed in permanent facilities and the rest (nine schools) are still in temporary facilities. Half of the schools included in this study own their school buildings and the other half are leasing their buildings.

Charter School Staff

The 26 schools employ a total of 378 FTE (full-time equivalent) classroom teachers, but the total number of all employees (full time and part time) amounts to 772. This means that close to half of charter school staff members are part-time employees. The average ratio of FTEs to the total number of their students in these schools is approximately 1 to 20.

Based on the data reported by 26 principals, 24 schools reported that 100 percent of their teachers are currently certified to teach in Idaho and two schools reported 90 and 92 percent. (This is pretty consistent with classroom teachers’ responses relating to their certification status on pages 6–7 of the report). Almost all parent respondents and 95 percent of student respondents agreed that teachers in their charters schools are well prepared to teach subjects they are assigned to teach. Ninety-seven percent of staff respondents agreed with this assessment.

Like principals of non-charter public schools, charter school principals shoulder multiple responsibilities in leading their schools. But a number of responsibilities stand out for charter school principals. Most charter school principals have direct control of hiring and firing their staff members. About 85 percent of principals in this study listed facility management as one of their major responsibilities. More than one third of the principals are also teaching in their charter schools. The following table summarizes major responsibilities checked by charter school principals.

Table 5
Percent of Charter School Principals Who Checked Their
Major Responsibilities

Major Responsibility	%
Hiring and firing	96.2
Instructional leadership	96.2
Leadership in staff development	96.2
Reporting to various groups	96.2
Fiscal management	88.5
Facility management	84.6
Parent/Community involvement	84.6
Marketing	69.2
Legal issues	69.2
Fundraising	53.8
Teaching	34.6
Other	15.4

When asked about the most important qualities they look for in hiring staff, charter school principals clearly indicated that they sought teachers who were enthusiastic and could motivate students, were flexible, and had a history of successful teaching experience. They also wanted teachers whose educational views aligned with the school’s mission. Table 6 provides a list of key desired teacher characteristics along with supporting comments by principals.

Table 6
Desired Teacher Characteristics with Supporting Comments from Principals

Teacher Characteristics	Quotations
1. Enthusiasm and skill in motivating students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I look for great teachers who are willing to go the extra mile with children.</i> <i>We . . . require [the] hiring candidate to conduct a classroom lesson with our students, so that we can assess their ability to engage students.</i>
2. Flexibility	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Working in a charter school and working in a small charter school is much like working in a fishbowl. Teachers have to be prepared and ready to work in that kind of environment.</i>
3. History of successful teaching experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Well seasoned teachers that are still having fun.</i> <i>[Our schools] seeks to find Highly Qualified Teachers that have skill in differentiating the curriculum in the classroom. Our teachers are skilled and able to adjust to the needs of all students.</i>
4. Teaching philosophy aligns with school mission	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>[G]ive assurance that they will implement and model the school's philosophy and mission statement.</i> <i>Belief in our philosophy; expertise in a specific field.</i>
5. Possess content knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Subject area expertise is our primary concern.</i> <i>[E]xpertise in a specific field.</i>
6. Possess collaborative competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Team oriented.</i> <i>We value people who can handle a freewheeling workplace and hold their own in an exchange of ideas.</i>
7. Have a dedication to teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>I look for teachers who are willing to go the extra mile with children.</i> <i>Highly motivated towards teaching high school students.</i>
8. Possess instructional and assessment competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Pedagogically proficient.</i>
9. Be a lifelong learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Always looking for ways to improve.</i>
10. Be a positive person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Always have a positive attitude. “Can Do” spirit.</i>
11. Possess professional skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>We value teachers who have demonstrated a high level of professionalism.</i>

Choosing Charter Schools

What are key reasons parents and students choose to attend or leave charter schools? To address this question, we asked students and parents directly in our surveys.

Responses from students clearly suggest that their parents greatly influenced their choice of a charter school. About 70 percent of student respondents reported that their parents wanted them to go to a charter school, while about 36 percent of parent respondents reported that their children wanted to go to the charter schools as one of the reasons for their choice. As shown in Table 7, dissatisfaction with their previous school’s environment, unchallenging classes, and lack of individual help from teachers are the major reasons students choose charter schools. To a lesser extent (a smaller percentage), parent respondents seemed to agree with students’ responses. Having friends or siblings in the same charter school was also rated by both students and parents as a big factor in their choice.

Table 7
Reasons for Choosing Charter Schools Reported by Percent of Students and Parents

Reasons	Student (%)	Parent (%)
• My parent wanted me to go to this charter school.	69.3	35.6
• My child wanted to go to this charter school.		
• I was not happy at other schools.	33.1	16.3
• My child was not happy at other schools.		
• I was not getting very good grades at my last school.	14.7	10.5
• My child was not getting very good grades at his/her last school.		
• I was having other problems at my last school.	21.3	11.4
• My child was having other problems at his/her school.		
• My classes were too easy at my last school.	25.1	19.1
• My child’s classes were too easy at his/her last school.		
• My classes were too hard at my last school.	6.8	.8
• My child’s classes were too hard at his/her last school.		
• I didn’t get the individual help I needed at my last school.	27.3	10.3
• My child didn’t get the individual help he/she needed at his/her last school.		
• I have friends at this school.	39.4	19.8
• My child has friends at this school.		

When parents were asked what affected their choice of charter schools, the top three factors were: “philosophy of the school” (70 percent of parent respondents), “small school or class size” (60 percent), and “safe school environment” (55 percent). Other factors included “leadership of the school” (37 percent), “high testing scores of students in the school” (26 percent), and demographics of the school (14 percent).

In analyzing both students’ and parents’ comments regarding their choice of charter schools, we found that school environment is still a key issue. A significant number of student respondents reported that they were “bullied” or “picked on” in their previous schools and their current charter schools provide them with a safe learning environment.

There are no bullies at this school and there were people at my old school who were not very nice to me. — Anonymous student

Most parents of children attending charter schools in Idaho were well informed of what charter schools can offer before they enrolled their children in these schools. “Word of mouth” accounted for how over 80 percent of parents heard about the charter schools their children would attend. This means most parents heard about these schools through social contacts with family member, friends, other parents, and charter school teachers/principals. These parents usually like the philosophy of these charters schools and educational programs that fit their children’s needs, such as a focus on arts and health and technical education. Many students also expressed appreciation of the in-depth exposure to certain careers and relevant curricula their charter schools offer. For some parents of home schooled children, the charter school is a great option for their children’s transition to the public school system. Some parents described charter schools as “public schools with a private school environment” (e.g., small school or class size, clear school mission, and individual attention).

The learning expeditions (long, in-depth studies) are extremely innovative and engaging for students. Grade-level teams of teachers work together to create and revise these expeditions and we now have a detailed content map of all science and social studies expeditions to make sure we are covering major content standards through the grades. — Anonymous principal

When asked whether they plan to re-enroll their current charter school children in regular public schools in the future, 37 percent of parent

respondents indicated “yes.” The most dominant reasons expressed by these parents are the following:

- The charter schools their children are currently enrolled in do not serve high school students.
- There are more class options in regular public schools and extra-curricular activities, particularly sports.
- The education of their children at charter schools has prepared them to excel in regular public schools and to be exposed to a more diverse student population for the growth of their social skills and problem-solving skills in a more “real world” setting.

This charter school gives me a chance to improve and take on new challenges without having to worry so much about my grade.

— **Anonymous student**

I also needed a school that [is] challenging yet respects my opinion and existence as a human being. — **Anonymous student**

This school was the best choice for my child, who was just starting kindergarten. A lot of parent research went into making this choice. The tour given by students from the school was most impressive, as is the philosophy and mission for the school. We were lucky enough to get into the school for kindergarten through the lottery. — **Anonymous parent**

We liked the smaller class size and more challenging curriculum in my son’s area of interest. Also liked electives that were relevant (not “Bowling 101”). — **Anonymous parent**

It is encouraging to notice from the parent survey data that a few charter schools are taking advantage of dual enrollment opportunities offered in non-charter public schools. Doing so has allowed students to benefit from the strengths of both charter schools and non-charter public schools. We have also found that parents whose children are enrolled in charter high schools, particularly those with a career focus, are less likely to shift their children to non-charter public high schools. For example, none of the parent respondents from Meridian Technical Charter School and Meridian Medical Charter School plan to enroll their children back in non-charter public high schools.

Students', Parents', and Teachers' Experiences with Charter Schools

To assess students', parents', and teachers' satisfaction level relating to their experiences at their charter schools, they were first asked whether they are happy with their charter schools and then asked to indicate their satisfaction level on various aspects of their charter schools: clear expectations and rules (**Rules**), clear purpose of the school (**Purpose**), zero tolerance of student bullies (**Bully**), student access to technologies for their learning (**Tech**), class size (**Size**) and safe learning environment (**Safety**). Ninety-seven percent of student, parent, and teacher respondents were happy with their charter schools in general. As shown in Figure 3, most students, parents, and teachers are satisfied with various aspects of their charter schools described above.

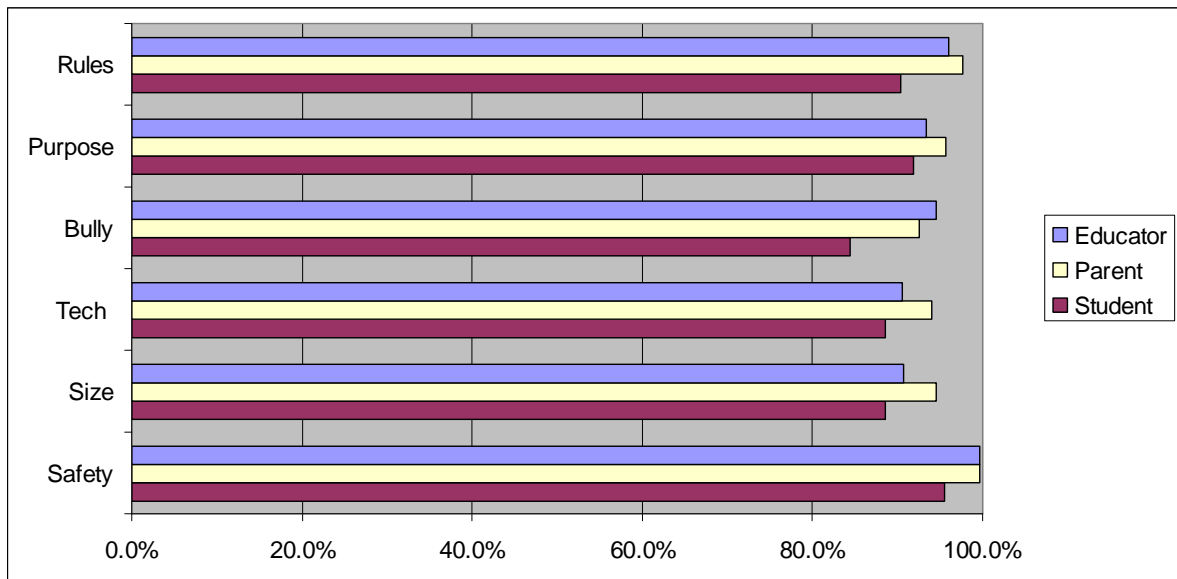


Figure 3. Satisfaction with Various Aspects of Charter Schools by Percent of Student, Parent, and Staff Respondents

In addition, over 90 percent of student (90.1 percent), parent (95.4 percent), and staff (98.7 percent) respondents were positive about the communication between schools and families. Ninety-seven percent of parent respondents felt welcome at their children's schools. Almost all parent respondents agreed that their children were respected by their teachers and 90 percent of students responded the same way. Most parent and student respondents also agreed that teachers cared about students as persons. Seventy percent of student respondents reported that they had

received individual help from their teachers and 86 percent of parent respondents agreed.

I felt he would receive a more well rounded education at this charter school—not only are academics strong but the emphasis on community and character is exactly what I wanted for my children. —Anonymous parent

About 85 to 99 percent of staff respondents reported that teachers in charter schools reflect upon and evaluate the success of their schools’ educational programs on a regular basis (85.4 percent); teachers work together as a team (95.2 percent), and teachers in charter schools have what it takes to get children to learn (98.7 percent). The above responses from staff are highly correlated with another set of survey questions designed to assess their experiences with charter schools listed below by percent of staff members who agreed:

- Teachers are involved in decision making in the school (91.1 percent).
- Teachers are able to influence the direction of the school (88.7 percent).
- Teachers are supported by their school administrators in their efforts to meet students’ needs (95.7 percent).
- Teachers, administrators, and the school board members work collaboratively to meet the school’s performance goals (89.6 percent).

To further tap into teachers’ experiences at their charter schools, they were asked in an open-ended survey question to describe the benefits and challenges of teaching at charter schools.

As for the benefits, the following were most frequently described:

Support. Charter school teachers enjoy enormous support from their school principals and parents. There is a strong teamwork spirit and collegiality among teachers. Principals tend to be on top of various issues in the school and provide timely support for their staff. Teachers feel highly valued and treated as true professionals.

Small Size. Thanks to the small size of their schools or classes, teachers are able to develop individual relationships with students and spend one-on-one time with students in need of help.

Autonomy. Teachers in charter schools have a lot of freedom to design their own curriculum that works for their students. Some teachers feel that being able to do so makes their job much easier and more enjoyable.

I enjoy not having to teach from required texts but instead we have the ability to do focused investigations which are interesting for the children. We can go in depth and cover the curriculum areas in a more natural way. — Anonymous teacher

There is professional freedom. For instance, teachers who are hired are told that they have been hired because they are professionals and that they are allowed to teach here. State standards, of course, are followed, but there is little micromanagement of teachers in the classroom. — Anonymous teacher

High Expectations. There is a clear and high expectation for all students in their schools. There is also a high expectation for teachers. Most teachers feel that the majority of their students are more motivated to learn than those they taught at regular public schools. As a result, teachers are able to spend more time focusing on student learning than on disciplinary problems with individual students.

Continuous Quality Improvement. Charter school teachers enjoy a high level of professionalism among themselves. They are motivated to excel in their careers by continuously improving their current practices and by searching for new ways of teaching that will better serve their students’ needs. The “small learning community” environment at charter schools has made it possible for teachers to be creative and innovative with their teaching in meeting students’ needs.

We have a team of highly qualified and positive teachers who seek to better their teaching experiences to help the betterment of the student body. — Anonymous teacher

Some of the greatest challenges described by staff respondents include:

Special Education and Other Individual Student Needs. Some charter school teachers with special education students feel they are not equipped or adequately funded to provide quality services for special education students, particularly those with severe physical or mental disabilities. It is also common in small charter schools that teachers have to teach students of various ability levels in the same classroom. Some teachers do not

feel well-enough trained to provide differentiated instructions on such a scale.

Burnout. Teachers who join charter schools usually share the missions or philosophies of these schools. These teachers are very dedicated to what they believe and work very hard to turn what they believe into a reality for the students they serve. They tend to work long hours with multiple responsibilities, which is the norm in many small charter schools. Ninety-seven percent of staff respondents reported in the survey that they had too many non-instructional duties at their charter schools. There is a concern among some charter school teachers that they may get burned out for working under stress for too long. In 2008–09, we found about 23 percent of classroom teachers in the schools that opened in 2004 are new teachers (those who have been teaching in the same charter school for one or less than one year). About 36 percent of the classroom teachers in these schools have been in the same school for two years or less. We cannot conclude these percentages as turnover rates of teachers because some of these schools are expanding.

School Facilities. Many charter schools in Idaho are operating in school buildings that are inadequate in space and poorly equipped with technologies. Some classrooms are pretty crowded. Unlike non-charter public schools, charter schools are not allowed to propose bonds or levies for their school facilities. They have to use their general funding for their school facilities.

School Choice vs. School Control. Teachers appreciated parents’ support and involvement in their schools, but in the meantime, they did not feel comfortable in setting boundaries for parent involvement relating to their teaching. This has resulted in their frustration with some parents who tried to take control of the school, particularly those founding parents of their charter schools. Teachers felt strongly that a charter school is a school choice for parents and students, but that teachers and principals are trained to run the school. Some teachers wanted to be better trained on how to use parent involvement effectively for their schools.

Innovation of Charter Schools

One of the intentions of the Idaho Charter Law is to encourage all charter schools in the state to be innovative in providing quality education for their students in exchange for exemptions from various rules and regula-

tions that are usually imposed on non-charter public schools. Therefore one of the questions this study seeks to address is: What is innovative about Idaho charter schools in their structures and programs in meeting students’ needs? Through our surveys, we raised the same questions with charter school principals, staff, and parents. The following is a summary of their perspectives on the innovativeness of charter schools in Idaho.

Principals’ Perspective

All 26 principals who responded felt strongly about the positive work their schools are accomplishing and described structures and practices they considered innovative. These innovations appear to be driven by an aligned philosophy among staff members and community and made possible by common purpose, a clearly articulated theory of learning, and an ability to act with fewer constraints than most non-charter public schools encounter.

Table 8 shows key innovations described by principals. Although many public schools have implemented similar innovations, it is often more difficult because of such constraints as size, being embedded in larger systems, district curriculum requirements, and strong parental expectations for schools to reflect their own school experiences. In charter school cases, the schools begin implementation with a specified philosophy that drives their charter initiative. Parents seek to enroll their children because the philosophy reflects their expectations and staff are hired because they align with the school’s mission or the school’s theory of action. These are schools created from the ground up.

The first two innovations in the table focus on creating learning environments that treat all students as talented and gifted, and offer a curriculum traditionally associated with these levels of student performance. In other words, honors-type programs are created with the belief that all students can handle such expectations and learning environments. Principals convey a strong sense of efficacy in achieving their school missions.

Innovations three through five reflect a focus on integrating experiences not traditionally offered to students. These include offering music and foreign languages at the primary levels and providing direct, real-world experiences for students who are interested in specific career areas such as health and technologies.

The last two innovations reflect control over the curriculum and how it is implemented. These two innovations suggest strong alignment of curriculum goals and expected student behavior.

Table 8
Charter School Innovations and Supportive Principals’ Descriptions

- 1. Honors Level Expectations.** *All classes are taught as honors-level or higher, beginning in sixth grade. We do not interrupt class time for activities, announcements, assemblies, or deliveries; we hold class time to be sacred. We emphasize the importance of excellent instructors in the education process above all else.*
- 2. Offering Talented and Gifted Curriculum as the School Norm.** *While gifted and talented students will be identified in accordance with Idaho Code . . . we will offer an enriched gifted and talented curriculum for all students. Teachers, with the help of educational assistants and a team of parent volunteers, will be engaged in the act of direct teaching throughout the day, using every method available to them (tactile, visual, kinesthetic, auditory, group, and independent approaches).*
- 3. Core Integration and the Arts.** *We integrate the arts in all areas of the curriculum and our students also attend stand-alone art classes every day. Our students learn how to express themselves and be proud of their accomplishments.*
- 4. Health Integration and Field Application.** *[In addition to a] curriculum that fully integrates the health sciences into all courses [we] also give students in-depth exposure to the health care field in Treasure Valley by using extensive field trips, guest speakers, research projects, community service projects, internships, and clinical field work.*
- 5. Early Introduction of Foreign Language and Music (K–3) .** *The distinctive aspects . . . include the study of a second language, piano lessons for Kindergarten through third-grade students, enriched gifted and talented services, integration of community service into the learning process, and a full integration of technology as a learning tool.*
- 6. Alignment of Expectations and Curriculum.** *Consistency between classrooms exists not only in behavior expectations, but also through a curriculum that aligns with each grade level.*
- 7. Control over Curriculum to Build Safety Through Interpersonal Regard.** *The atmosphere created by our focus on kindness allows children to soar socially and academically. Students are not afraid to take academic risks (e.g., asking or answering questions in front of peers) when they feel safe and supported.*

Parents’ Perspective

About 1,179 parents provided their comments regarding the innovations of their children’s charter schools. Table 9 displays the most common types of innovations these parents described and the number of parents that described each type of innovation.

Table 9
Types of Charter School Innovations Most Commonly
Described by Parent Respondents

Innovation Type	No. of Parents
Curriculum	489
Individualized instruction	296
High academic standards	233
School staff characteristics	170
Rules and discipline	108
Social expectation	103
Safe environment	85
Parent involvement	62

As shown in the table above, the most common innovation related to the curriculum. Many parents believed that having a focused curriculum, such as on technology, health, the arts, or business, is innovative. One parent reported that the curriculum at their child’s school “is arts-based with a theme each year on which classes are based. At the end of each year, all students participate/have the opportunity to participate in a large theater presentation based upon the year’s theme.” One parent reported, “My son has many interests in numerous modern technologies and this school comes very close to giving him exposure in most of his areas of interest.” Another parent stated, “My child does not learn the non-charter way. He is very artistic and right-brained. I was hoping if he went to a school that taught more right-brained techniques he would learn more easily.” In addition to having a focused curriculum, a substantial number of parents reported that the hands-on curriculum at their schools is innovative. For example, according to one parent, “the hands-on approach has enabled my child to become not just an excellent student, but also a compassionate, inspired, and eager leader.” According to another parent, “the hands-on approach teaches better than just book-learning.” Finally, parents also reported that the curriculum at their child’s charter is innovative because it incorporates character-building opportunities and requires children to move beyond memorization of facts by using critical-thinking skills.

The second most common innovation was individualized instruction. According to parents who described this type of innovation, the small schools or class sizes allow their children to receive more individual attention on a daily basis. As a result, the teachers know the strengths and

weaknesses of each child. One parent reported, “The teachers are very good in giving individual extra help to meet my child’s needs, which is different than a public school.” Another parent reported, “The school lets my child excel in areas where she is strong and gives her extra help in areas or subjects she is weaker in.” Another parent mentioned “the small class sizes and ability of teachers to have more one-on-one instruction. The smaller number of students makes it more difficult for my child to slip between the cracks.”

Another commonly reported innovation was the high academic standards of the charter school. These parents believe that their children are learning more because they are challenged to meet these standards. One parent said, “My daughter is learning a lot more because of high expectations” and another said, “My child is challenged on a daily basis at school, unlike at her other school, where she was constantly complaining of being bored.”

In addition to the curriculum, individualized instruction, and high academic standards at their child’s charter school, parents also commonly reported that school staff characteristics, rules and discipline, social expectations, safe environment, and parent involvement are innovative. School staff characteristics mentioned most frequently included the teachers and administrators coordinating their efforts well and being attentive to and caring about students in their school. Comments on rules and discipline mentioned the clear expectations of the school and the consistent consequences for not meeting these expectations. Social expectations were most often related to the respect that their child was expected to give to their teachers and peers. When commenting about the safe environment of the school, parents said that they appreciated that their child was not bullied at school by their peers. Finally, parent involvement included the school communicating with them about their child’s progress and difficulties their child may be having.

Staff Members’ Perspective

All staff respondents gave their views on the innovativeness of their schools with great enthusiasm. Many of their comments echo the views expressed by principals and parents.

“Teaching to the high” was viewed as a most important aspect of their charter schools. This refers to the high expectations and academic stan-

dards for all students. All charter schools follow Idaho state academic standards and some charter schools are trying to take their students beyond those standards. One thing that distinguishes charter schools in this regard is that “teaching to the high” is well aligned with what the school is going to offer in terms of the curriculum as well as the necessary learning environment where teachers will be able to teach and students will be able to learn. Special needs students are often fully included in the classroom community with parent involvement. In a multi-age class setting, older students help teach younger students through modeling and collaboration. Younger students are given the opportunity to observe older students and learn from them as well as be a leader and teacher to students who are younger than them. “Teaching to the high” is not one model that fits all. It is individualized instruction to bring all the students to the same level with adequate and timely support.

We teach to the high, but we also are given the opportunity to spend time with and meet the needs of students functioning on other levels. —Anonymous teacher

The safe environment is, in my opinion, the main reason students come to school every day, look forward to learning, and can progress at their pace. —Anonymous teacher

It may not be innovative, but we focus on the core teaching and not the extracurricular activities. The academic progress of our students is paramount, and we push them to advanced levels of thought and quality of work, which they rise to. We are not about satisfying the lowest levels of learning, but make our students (low performing and average) rise to the highest performing levels. Not all make it, but most earnestly try (and often surpass their own expectations). —Anonymous teacher

Teaching to the high with constant review. Consistency in expectations throughout each grade level. —Anonymous teacher

Our school implements many techniques from direct instruction to inquiry to integrated instruction. We teach to the top, go at a fast pace, and provide a safe harbor for all. —Anonymous teacher

“Integrated curriculum” is common in most Idaho charter schools. Teachers felt strongly that an integrated curriculum brings students relevance to and passion for learning. One teacher commented:

I am able to tie my dance curriculum to the state standards and the academic curriculum that is being taught in the classrooms. My students learn more about themselves, other people, other cultures and ideas, all through dance. I am able to provide creativity, problem-solving, explanation, and inspiration through dance. Students get to be flexible with their minds, hearts, and bodies in my classes, allowing them to explore their world outside of a book.

An integrated curriculum allows students to get real-world experience. One charter school has recently begun an initiative that is geared toward the environment and the surrounding ecosystem. This program is designed to help students develop a sense of place and connect their learning to something they are familiar with and can connect to. The integrated, project-based curriculum also allows teachers to target individual students for their academic interests, needs, and skills.

Creating and nurturing a positive school culture transcends all aspects of effective charter schools. These schools not only just provide higher levels of learning but also emphasize the importance of citizenship and personal responsibility.

We follow the Expeditionary Learning model, which really strives to create a positive school culture. Students feel safe, comfortable, and respected by both their peers and their teachers, which makes them ask many questions and feel empowered to challenge. We also do a lot of social constructivism of learning so students really get a chance to develop their ideas through dialogue with other students.

— **Anonymous teacher**

The environment that students are in allows them to have greater success at learning. Higher expectations of the student’s performance relate to greater achievement in their education. Expecting a higher quality of lessons and preparation from the staff also contributes to the distinctiveness of this school. — **Anonymous teacher**

Staff respondents felt their charter schools have a solid, clear vision of what their schools are about. Most charter school students know what they are going to get before they enroll. A common understanding of the

mission of their schools leads to a positive school culture in which all teachers, school administrators, students, parents, and community members contribute to high-quality education.

Major Barriers and Facilitators

All charter school principals in this study were asked to list the major barriers and facilitators of their major charter school operations with regard to policies at district and state levels. As some state and district policies are often viewed as barriers for school choice or innovations, we first asked principals to respond to the question of what exemptions of state or district policies they used or didn't use in running their charter schools. We found that charter schools in Idaho did not use as many exemptions as we expected for their innovative charter schools. As shown in Table 10, the majority of charters schools still follow state and district policies and rules.

Table 10
Exemptions Reported by Percent of Charter Schools

Area of Exemptions	Yes	No	N/A	Total
Length of school day or year	12.0	80.0	8.0	100%
Teacher/staff hiring/firing policies	16.0	80.0	4.0	100%
Teacher salary/pay schedule	24.0	68.0	8.0	100%
Teacher certification requirements	9.0	81.0	10.0	100%
Control of finances/budgetary/the ability to allocate funds	16.0	76.0	8.0	100%
Your sponsoring school district student assessment policies for school and classroom use	25.0	57.0	18.0	100%
Curriculum requirements	28.0	68.4	4.0	100%
Student admission policies	20.0	76.0	4.0	100%
Student attendance policies	32.0	68.0	0	100%
Incentives, rewards, or sanctions due to school performance	16.0	68.0	16.0	100%

In addition to those listed in Table 10, we asked principals what other exemptions from state and district regulations and policies they would like their schools to have and explain why.

Out of 26 principals, 15 expressed their desires for some modifications of exemptions. Four themes were identified in their narrative; each theme is presented below along with a brief discussion of conceptual content.

Financial Concerns Ranging from Operations to Facilities

This area appears related to school size. The issue of small scale poses significant problems for charter schools, especially if they are rural and/or isolated. Chief among these problems is funding for facility space or special programs such as special education. One respondent summed up these needs by indicating that the “ability to fund buildings and huge special needs population” created hardships for charter schools. The following table illustrates the financial and operational issues charter schools face. Again, school size figures prominently.

Table 11
Principal Challenges in Charter School Operations

Theme	Principal Comment
<i>Auditing cost tied to larger schools</i>	<i>Believe that charters should not have to pay the same cost for auditing that districts pay. The type of audit we are required to do means a 6 to 8 thousand dollar expense on a \$900,000 budget. The local district pays the same amount for a \$25 million budget. This is a waste of taxpayer dollars.</i>
<i>Certification requirements limit use of staff</i>	<i>No Child Left Behind regulations; these tie hands, especially with certification issues in small schools. For example, we have three students at the high school level who read at a fourth-grade level; we need a teacher trained to teach them reading, not a certified high school English teacher for them.</i>
<i>Regulations limit resources</i>	<i>We are a school of “N” students and a district, but we are not able to send in student enrollment for a higher rate as do small districts in the state of Idaho. We are also not allowed to have supplemental levies that could help the budget. We are also limited in the programs we can offer to special education students.</i>

Reporting and Bureaucratic Requirements

Paperwork and non-student-related activities have always been the bane of school administrators, especially in small rural schools. For charter schools, such activities appear compounded by their size and sources of funding. According to one principal,

Our school is subject to all of the state and federal regulations and policies for non-charter public schools plus the regulations for charter schools. This results in excessive paperwork and bureaucracy.

Another principal described this issue more acerbically: “There is too much reporting to too many people in general.” In many ways, charter schools, especially those with minimal infrastructure, face a double bind. They must meet most of the requirements of public schools plus special requirements for charter authorization and funding. The following table summarizes groups to which the percent of charter schools have to report.

Table 12
Reporting by Percent of Charter Schools

Charter Schools Report to . . .	% Yes
Sponsoring school district	54
State Department of Education	84
The school governing board	96
Parents	68
Communities/general public	44
Private funders	8
Legislature	32
Charter School Commission	46

Small School Size

Five principals directly referenced school size as problematic for charter schools. However, as noted earlier, many comments indirectly relate to school size, thus making school size an important variable in policy decisions relating to charter schools. One administrator said, “There is a lot to do every day and it is difficult to do it all. I handle all areas, so I do not have the ‘central office’ help that larger school districts do.” Another principal succinctly described the overall challenge faced in small charter school districts:

Principals of charter schools actually are superintendents of their own small districts. The office at a charter school bustles with every job description a large district often has. Unfortunately, there is not enough money to pay for the support staff needed to do all of the tasks the district office would do at the charter school

level. Many charter school principals only last two years because the job is so daunting. It is my bias that the legislature could support charter schools more by providing a special formula to entitle charter schools to more administrative support monies.

Public Relations

Only two principals commented on the need to communicate the work of charter schools. One principal pointed out that “the vast majority of public school administrators, particularly superintendents, have deep-rooted misunderstandings and suspicions about charter schools.” The other noted that regardless of size, charter school principals must address IBEDS (Idaho Basic Education Data System) and IFARMS (Idaho Financial Accounting Reporting Management System) state education requirements, which “means a great deal of work for administrators.” The idea implied in these quotes is that if public school administrators understood the complexities faced by charter school principals, they would have greater empathy for the challenges charter schools face.

In terms of facilitating factors, principals mentioned two categories of response: the state department of education and the local school district affiliated with the charter school.

Our major facilitator is State Department of Education personnel, who are very helpful in regard to charter school issues. Our local district is very supportive and helpful.

Our best facilitators are at the office of Tom Luna. [Tom Luna is superintendent of public education in Idaho]

The SDE has been very supportive of charters over the last two years. This is a significant shift from the previous administration’s policy of benign neglect.

The budget department at SDE and the alternative certification group have been very helpful.

Shirley Rau with the SDE and Tamara L. Baysinger, the charter schools program manager, continue to be a great help in understanding policy and paperwork concerns.

[We are] a district-sponsored charter school and the charter school leases the state of the art facility from the school district for a nom-

inal fee; that has no financial impact on the "hi-tech" program we run here. Our school district has given great leeway in how we run this program. In fact, this school was set up in 1999 as a R&D school that could be utilized by the school district. In other words, new instructional approaches and environments could be initiated here, data collected, and then shared with other schools in the school district.

The policy with the greatest impact for facilitating the school includes the school's (district's) attendance policy.

[We] do have a cooperative working relationship with the district.

Influence of Charter Schools

As an exploratory question for this study, principals were asked to give examples or evidence to show that non-charter public schools are learning from their charter schools or adopting some of their practices. Table 13 presents principals' perceptions of how their charter schools have influenced public schools. The concept of charter schools serving as test beds for innovation appears to be supported by the types of influences principals describe. For example, influences 1 through 6 suggest that the charter schools implemented an approach and found it successful, and then the public school adopted it. In number 1, the charter school had been successful with a college-preparatory program that was perceived as influencing the implementation of the International Baccalaureate program in the public schools. In number 2 the charter school's method of using state standards as the basis for reporting student progress as opposed to letter grades was adopted by the nearby public school. Moreover, seven different charter schools perceive they have developed a model that has received positive recognition locally (3 and 4), regionally (6), and nationally (5).

Table 13
Perceived Influences of Charter School on Public Schools

Type of Influence and Supporting Quotation
<p>1. Influence on public school curriculum. <i>We believe that our local school district’s implementation of the International Baccalaureate program was a response to our success in providing a dedicated college-preparatory program of study.</i></p> <p>2. Public school uses charter report card. <i>A nearby large school district just started using our method of “report cards.” [W]e do “achievement reports” using numbers or letters to address the students’ understanding of the state standards versus ABC’s.</i></p> <p>3. Harbor Method adopted. <i>While the Harbor Method first came about in the charter school movement, the Boise School District has adopted this method for one of its public schools.</i></p> <p>4. Concept of kindness adopted. <i>Many schools are adopting the concept of kindness in their schools.</i></p> <p>5. Nationally recognized model. <i>The community-based curriculum model has become a nationally recognized program.</i></p> <p>6. Service learning model. <i>The service learning program has become a model for the State of Idaho.</i></p> <p>7. Observation and visitation. <i>Many teachers have come to observe our math program and our teachers have presented workshops in math for other districts.</i></p> <p>8. Regional presentation requests. <i>Have requests from two regions in our state to make presentations to explain how regional professional technical charter schools can operate in our state.</i></p> <p>9. Providing community service. <i>Students were able to provide community service at Central Elementary School in Nampa by providing school lunches to students and working with students in the kitchen.</i></p>

ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF IDAHO CHARTER SCHOOL STUDENTS

To examine the academic performance of charter school students in comparison with students in non-charter public schools in Idaho, we analyzed two sets of statewide assessments: the Idaho Standards Achievement Tests and the Direct Mathematics and Writing Assessment.

In order to compare student testing scores, students are grouped into the following:

Charter school students. Students from 26 “brick and mortar” charter schools included in this study.

District students. Other students from the district where those “brick and mortar” charter schools are located, when applicable. (Some of these charter schools are not associated with any school district).

Non-charter students. Students from all schools in Idaho except for those from charter schools or the school for the deaf and blind.

All virtual charter schools, one recently opened “brick and mortar” charter school, and the school for the deaf and blind are not included in any of the three groups described above. We compared student test scores by their grade level, ELL (English Language Learners) status, ethnicity, special education status, and Title I status (students from low-income families), when these data are available.

Idaho Standards Achievement Tests

Idaho Standards Achievement Tests (ISAT) are a series of multiple-choice tests in reading, mathematics, and language usage in grades two through 10. The ISAT was developed in alignment with Idaho content/achievement standards and is offered in the fall and spring of each academic year. The ISAT became a required Idaho State assessment for every public school in 2002. Students’ scores on the ISAT are grouped in the following four levels:

ADVANCED: Exceeds standards. The student demonstrates through knowledge and mastery of skills that allow him/her to function independently above his/her current educational level.

PROFICIENT: Meets standards. The student demonstrates mastery knowledge and skills that allow him/her to function independently on all major concepts and skills related to his/her educational level.

BASIC: Below standards. The student demonstrates basic knowledge and skill usage but cannot operate independently on concepts and skills related to his/her educational level. The student requires remediation and assistance to complete tasks without significant error.

BELOW BASIC: Below Standards. The student demonstrates significant lack of skills and knowledge and is unable to complete basic skills or knowledge sets without significant remediation.

We have coded “Advanced” as 4, “Proficient” as 3, “Basic” as 2, and “Below Basic” as 1 in the following presentation of charter students’ testing scores on ISAT in comparison with non-charter students in the state.

ISAT Scores on Language Usage, Mathematics, and Reading

We have data available for third- through eighth-graders and 10th-graders who participated in ISAT in 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008. We found that charter school students, on average, scored higher than non-charter school students at every grade level mentioned above in language usage, mathematics, and reading. We found similar patterns in our comparisons by ethnicity, ELL status, special education status, and Title I status. We also found exceptions relating to charter school students: Title I students scored lower on language usage in 2008, lower on mathematics in 2004, 2006, and 2007, but higher in 2008, and lower on reading in all the years included; Native Americans in 2008 scored lower on language usage; Native Hawaiians in 2007 scored lower on mathematics; and African Americans in 2005 and Native Hawaiians in 2007 scored lower on reading.

Figures 4 through 12 illustrate charter school student scores on ISAT’s language usage, mathematics, and reading in comparison with non-charter students by grade level. (We selected the 10th grade to represent the high school level, eighth grade to represent the middle school or junior high level, and third grade to represent the elementary level.

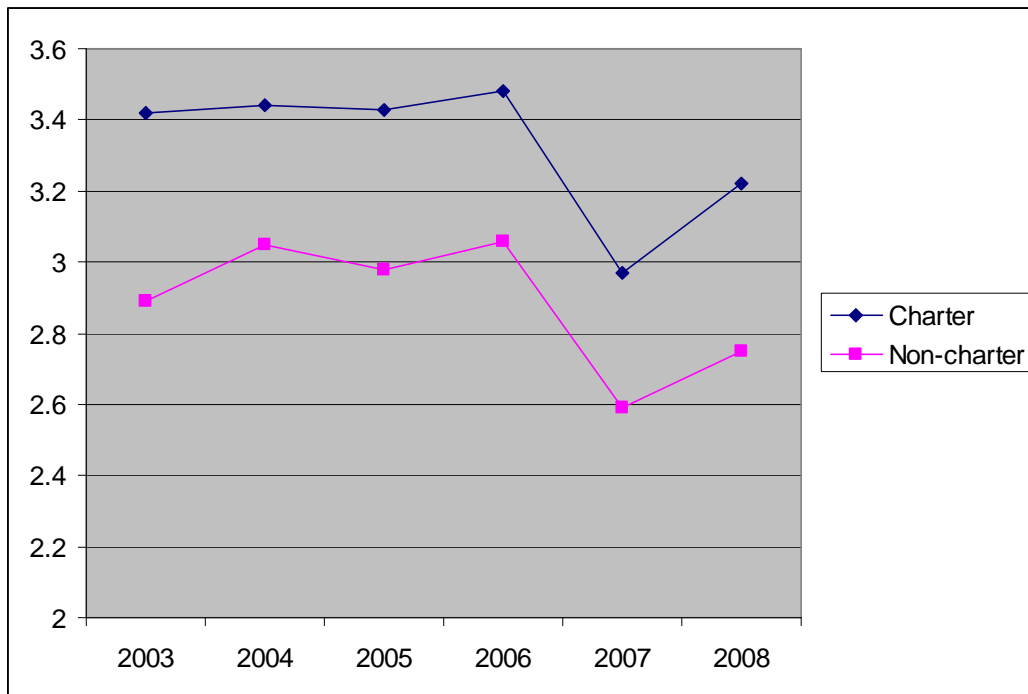


Figure 4. 10th-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Language Usage in Comparison with 10th-Grade Non-charter School Students

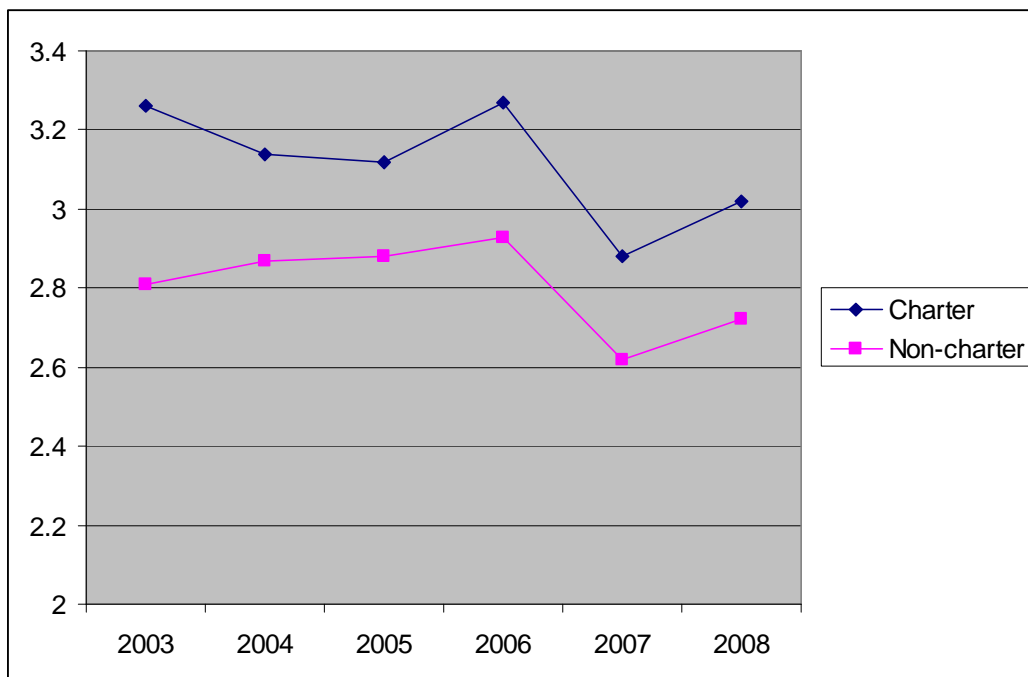


Figure 5. Eighth-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Language Usage in Comparison with Eighth-Grade Non-charter School Students.

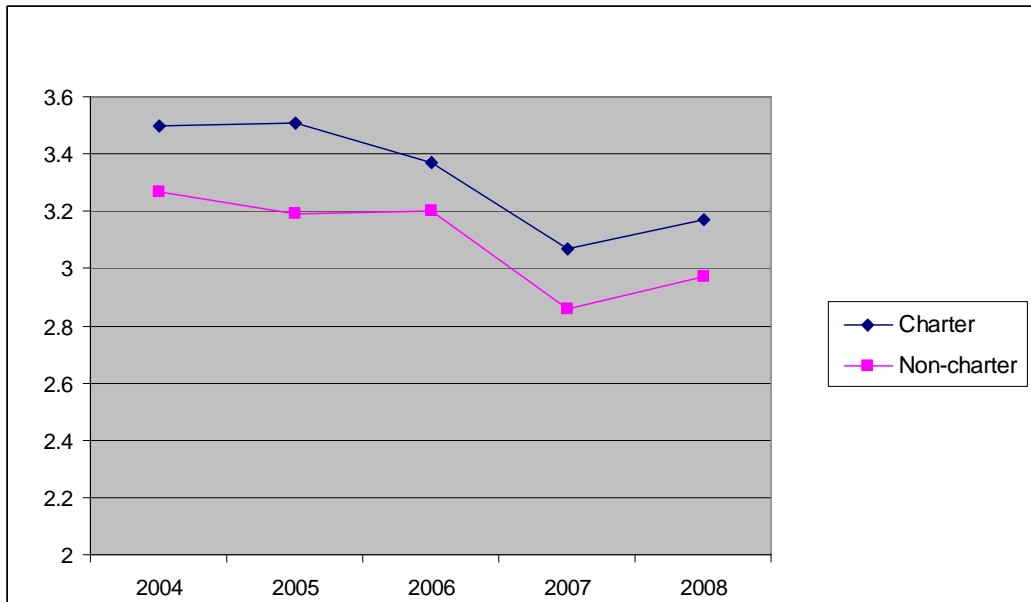


Figure 6. Third-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Language Usage in Comparison with Third-Grade Non-Charter School Students.

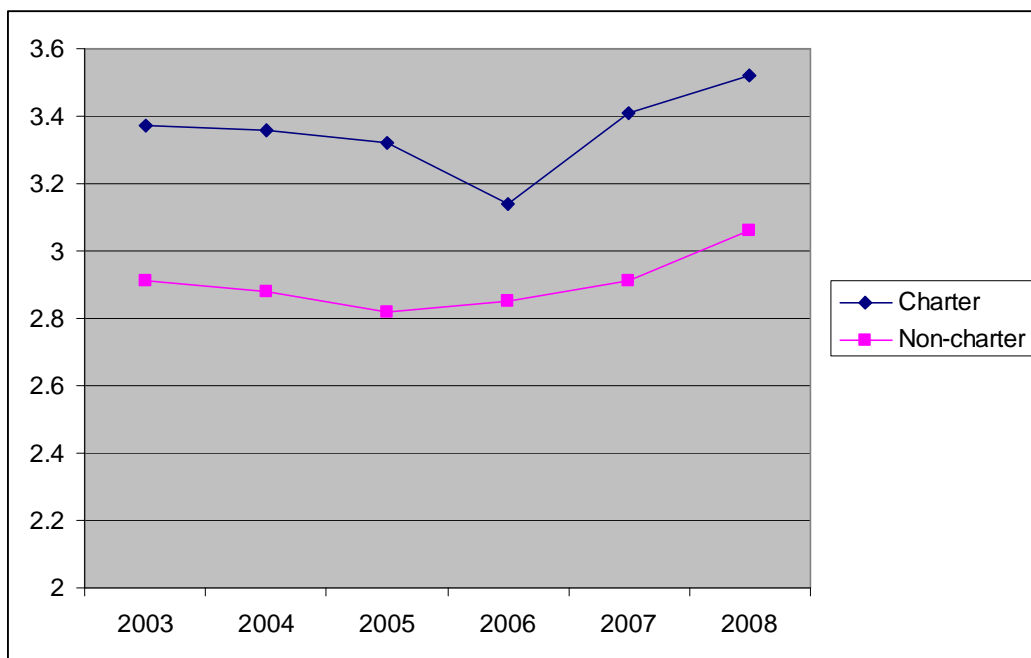


Figure 7. 10th-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Mathematics in Comparison with 10th-Grade Non-Charter School Students

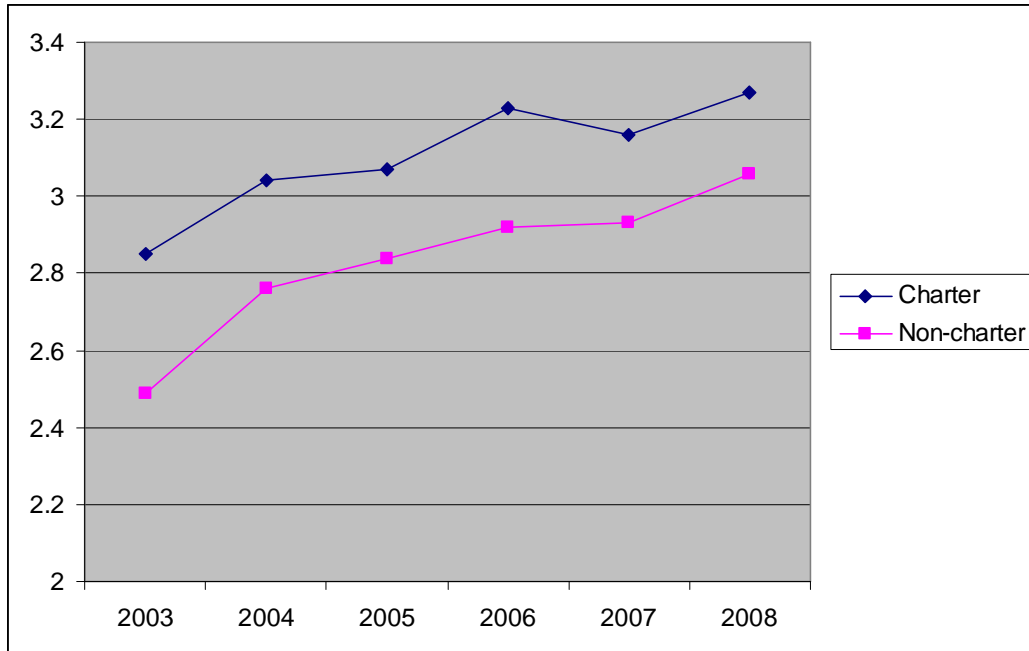


Figure 8. Eighth-Grade School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Mathematics in Comparison with Eighth-Grade Non-Charter School Students

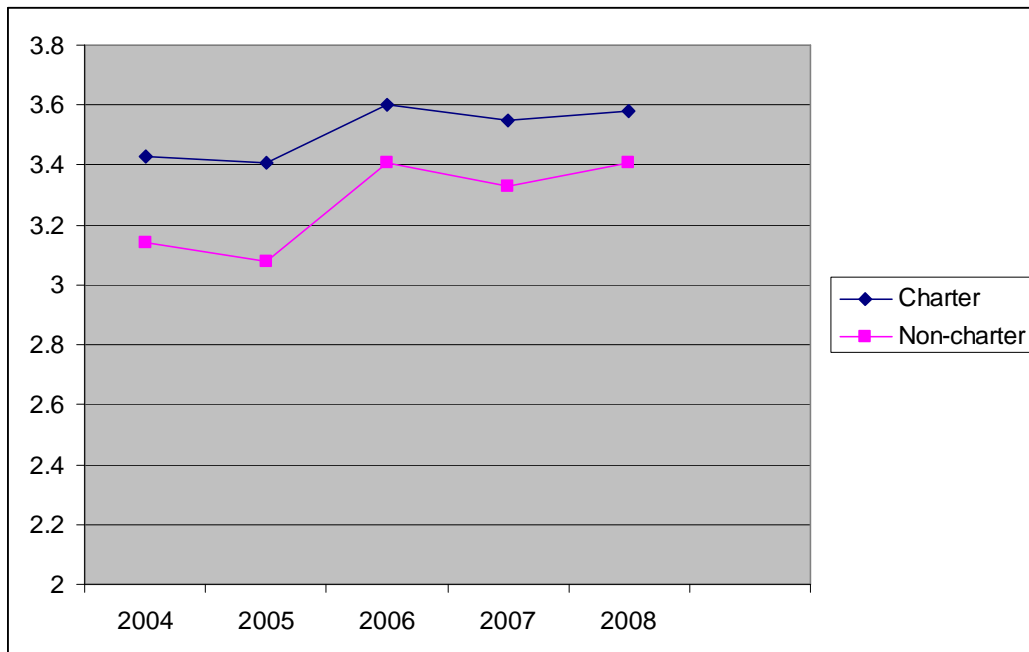


Figure 9. Third-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Mathematics in Comparison with Third-Grade Non-Charter School Students

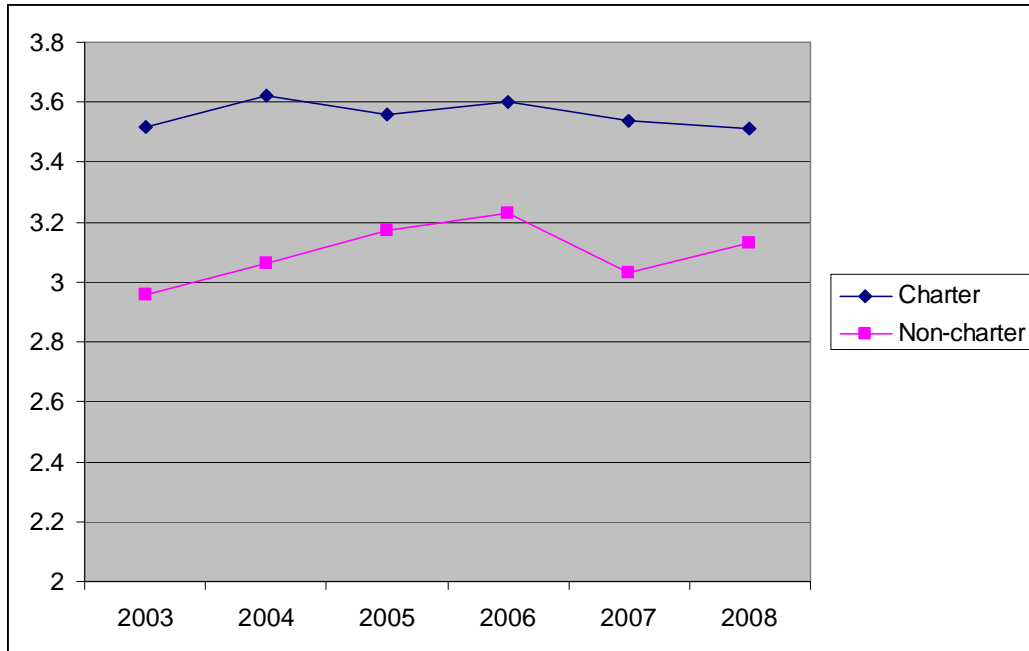


Figure 10. 10th-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Reading in Comparison with 10th-Grade Non-Charter School Students

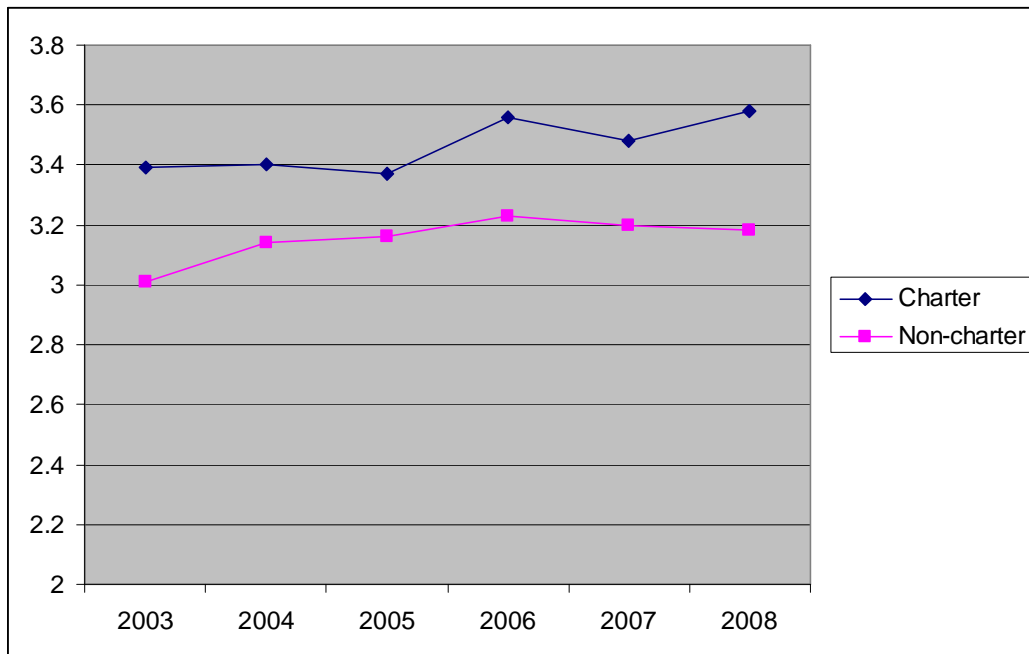


Figure 11. Eighth-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Reading in Comparison with Eighth-Grade Non-Charter School Students

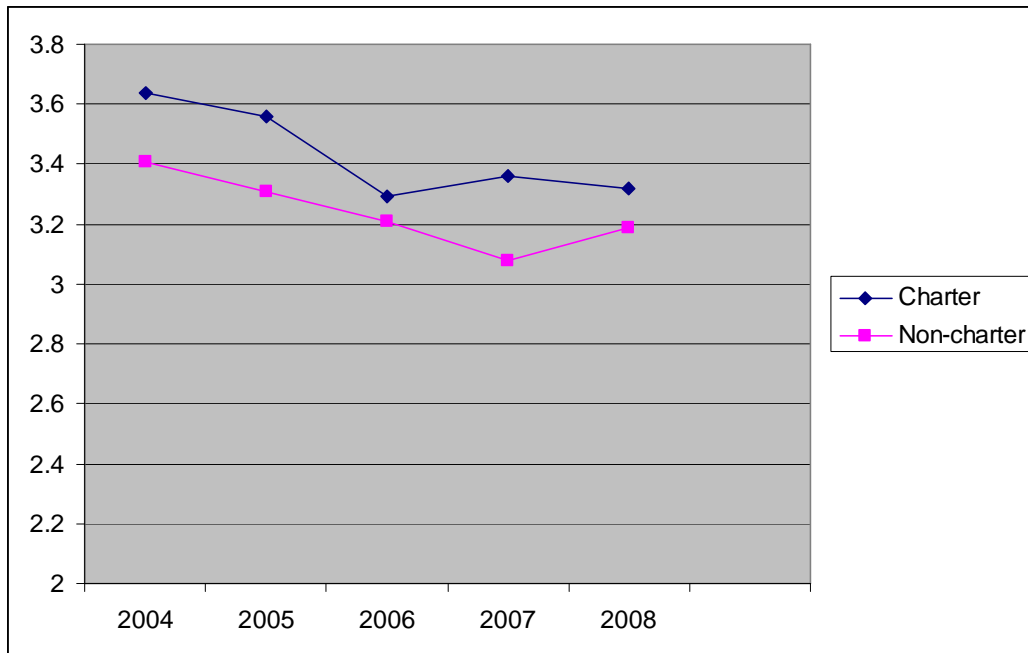


Figure 12. Third-Grade Charter School Student Testing Scores on ISAT Reading in Comparison with Third-Grade Non-Charter School Students

Direct Writing and Mathematics Assessments

These assessments include the Direct Writing Assessment (DWA) required of all fifth-, seventh-, and eighth-graders and the Direct Mathematics Assessment (DMA) required of all fourth-, sixth-, and eighth-graders enrolled in public schools in Idaho.

The DWA was designed to test the student skills of writing ideas and organization, voices and word choice, and sentence fluency. The student paper in the DWA is scored by a group of language arts teachers from around the state by using a four-point scoring rubric: 4 = Advanced Writing Ability, 3 = Proficient Writing Ability, 2 = Basic Writing Ability, and 1 = Below Basic Writing Ability.

The DMA was designed to test the student's understanding of basic mathematics skills, understanding of the situation in the problem, communication skills associated with mathematics, and processing skills associated with finding the correct answer. The DMA is scored by a group of mathematics teachers from around the state by using the four-point scoring rubric: 4 = Advanced Mathematics Ability, 3 = Proficient Mathematics Ability, 2 = Basic Mathematics Ability, and 1 = Below Basic mathematics ability.

Direct Writing and Mathematics Assessments Scores

In analyzing students' scores on direct writing and mathematics assessments, we combined Level 4 (Advanced Writing and Mathematics Ability) and Level 3 (Proficient Writing and Mathematics Ability) into one proficiency level. We treated Level 2 (Basic Writing and Mathematics Ability) and Level 1 (Below Basic Mathematics Ability) at the same level as "non-proficient." We compared the percent of charter school students proficient in DWA and DMA with the percent of other non-charter school students in the same school district each year over a five-year period by grade level. We found the percent of charter school students proficient in DWA and DMA are, in most cases, significantly (.05) higher than the percent of other students in the same school district with relatively high odds ratios (a measure of effect size, describing the strength of association or non-independence between two binary values). See Table 14 for a summary.

Table 14
Percent of Charter School Students Proficient in DWA and DMA in Comparison with
Other Students in the Same School District

MATH		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Grade 4	Charter Students	79%	81%	84%	82%	77%
	District Students	65%	64%	67%	72%	68%
	Odds Ratio	2.0	2.5	2.6	1.8	1.6
	Significant at .05?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Grade 6	Charter Students	56%	57%	66%	63%	65%
	District Students	26%	35%	47%	47%	50%
	Odds Ratio	3.6	2.4	2.2	1.9	1.8
	Significant at .05?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Grade 8	Charter Students	52%	53%	75%	72%	64%
	District Students	38%	49%	60%	61%	53%
	Odds Ratio	1.8	1.2	2.0	1.7	1.5
	Significant at .05?	Y	N	Y	Y	Y

Table 14 cont.

WRITING		2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Grade 5	Charter Students	62%	55%	81%	86%	70%
	District Students	46%	38%	75%	77%	65%
	Odds Ratio	1.9	2.0	1.4	1.9	1.2
	Significant at .05?	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Grade 7	Charter Students	NA	72%	73%	87%	72%
	District Students	45%	59%	73%	79%	70%
	Odds Ratio	NA	1.8	1.0	1.7	1.1
	Significant at .05?	NA	Y	N	Y	N
Grade 9	Charter Students	73%	87%	87%	91%	81%
	District Students	60%	67%	74%	80%	77%
	Odds Ratio	1.9	3.5	2.4	2.4	1.3
	Significant at .05?	Y	Y	Y	Y	N

Y = Significant at .05 and N = Not Significant at .05.

Supporting Data for Academic Performance

In addition to examining charter school students' academic performance on the ISAT and the direct writing and mathematics assessments, we also look at the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)* status as required by the federal "No Child Left Behind" act and the survey data from staff and students relating their schools' academic rigor.

Based on the report provided by the Idaho Department of Education, about 79 percent of charter schools in 2007–08 met the AYP goals while 54 percent of other public schools did so in the same year.

To explore if there is any association between charter school students' performance on Idaho statewide assessment and curriculum in these schools, charter school students and staff were asked how challenging are English/language arts, science, mathematics, and history/social studies in their schools. Most staff respondents rated these core academic courses as "Very Challenging" or "Somewhat Challenging," while the majority of student respondents agreed (see Table 15).

* In Idaho, there are 41 targets to meet in order to make AYP for 2007–08. AYP is calculated using the on-grade level (NCLB Core Items) portions of the spring ISAT in grades 3 through 8 and the entire 10th-grade ISAT. For more information on AYP in Idaho, please go to <http://www.boardofed.idaho.gov/saa/ayp.asp>

Table 15
Staff and Student Ratings on How Challenging Core Academic
Courses Are in Their Schools

Core Academic Courses	Respondent	Very Challenging	Somewhat Challenging	Total
English/Language Arts	Staff	60.5	38.1	98.6%
	Student	16.7	51.1	67.8%
Science	Staff	51.4	42.8	94.2%
	Student	17.7	46.6	64.3%
Mathematics	Staff	72.3	27.2	99.5%
	Student	24.9	41.6	66.8%
History/Social Studies	Staff	47.2	47.0	94.2%
	Student	17.4	45.8	63.5%

CONCLUSIONS

It is not difficult to conclude from this study that Idaho's "brick and mortar" charter schools have provided a welcome and effective school option for parents to meet the needs of their children. Parents, students, and staff members were overwhelmingly positive about their experiences with these charter schools. As indicated by Idaho state assessment data over a five-year period, charter school students performed better academically when compared with other students from the same school districts where some of these charter schools are located. This was also the case when compared with other non-charter-school students across the state or when such comparisons were conducted by student grade level, ELL status, special education status, ethnicity, or Title I status. The report provided by Idaho Department of Education for schools' AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) status in 2007–08 pointed in the same direction, with a higher percent of charter schools meeting goals of AYP in comparison with non-charter public schools across the state.

Idaho charter schools have exemplified well implemented "small learning communities" (SLCs), a school reform concept initiated by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and later supported by the U.S. Department of Education. Federally funded SLCs usually take place in large, comprehensive high schools, but SLCs in Idaho charter schools are happening to all students, K–12. Idaho charter schools have distinguished themselves with some effective SLC characteristics: small school or class sizes, a clear mission and purpose, personalized learning environment, clear rules and high expectations, rigorous and relevant curriculum, and strong bonding among teachers, students, parents, and school administrators.

Although some charter school innovations may occur in non-charter public schools, this study suggests they may be implemented with more facility in a charter school context. Some of the educational alternatives tried in charter schools would be difficult, if not impossible, to implement in non-charter public schools, such as integrating arts across the curriculum and in-depth exposure to certain career areas. In this sense, charter schools serve as test beds for innovations. Some educational models used by these charter schools have been recognized and adopted by some non-charter public schools in the state.

Charter schools in Idaho successfully completed their first decade in 2008 and have just entered a second decade, facing significantly reduced

budgets at school, district, and state levels in the current national economic crisis. The following is a series of questions that require careful considerations of Idaho educational policy makers, legislators, and school administrators for the future of charter schools:

- To what extent can charter schools be expanded to meet the high demand of parents (as indicated by the number of students on the wait-list for charter schools)? (It is unknown if such demand exists in areas where there are no charter schools at this point).
- To what extent can some of the charter school innovations be implemented in a non-charter public school setting?
- Is it cost effective or feasible to implement these educational innovations in a non-charter public school setting?
- To what extent can charter schools be treated as a school option in our public school system rather than, as often viewed by school administrators, an entity taking resources away from public schools?
- How can equity of funding for charter schools and non-charter public schools (such as funding for special education students and building facilities) be achieved?
- How can collaboration between charter schools and their sponsoring school districts be enhanced? (We have already noticed in our study some collaboration between districts and charter schools.)
- To what extent can more independent charter schools be developed with full support of their sponsoring school districts? (Meridian Technical Arts Charter School and Meridian Medical Arts Charter School are two good examples in this regard. The success of these two schools is also the success of the Meridian School District in offering an educational option for its students)
- How can the number of charter schools to be opened each year and the quality control of a charter school start-up be balanced?
- How can the lingering misconception of charter schools by some parents and school administrators be combated?
- As some charter schools are starting to grow in size, how can they maintain their original mission while continuing to provide a per-

sonalized learning environment with distinctive pedagogical approaches?

- As some charter schools mature and enthusiastic founding parents and/or principals are leaving, how can the mission and quality of these schools be sustained?